WHY WE STAND AGAINST STALINISM

John Molyneux

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John Molyneux is a socialist activist and writer in Dublin, and a member of the Socialist Workers Network and People Before Profit. He is editor of the Irish Marxist Review and of a number of books, including Lenin for Today (2017), The Dialectics of Art (2019) and Selected Writings on Socialism and Revolution (2022).

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Who was Joseph Stalin?

JOSEPH Vissarionovich Djugashvili (a.k.a Joseph Stalin) was born in Gori in Georgia (then part of the Tsarist empire) in 1878. He was educated in a Russian Orthodox theological seminary in Tiflis but broke with religion and became a socialist, joining the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and, at the same time, Lenin's Bolshevik faction in 1904.

Working as an activist in the underground he helped organise bank robberies for the party but also suffered several arrests and periods of exile in Siberia. In 1912 he was co-opted onto the Bolshevik Central Committee and started to use the name Stalin ('man of steel').

In 1916 he was conscripted to the army but was ruled unfit for service on medical grounds. In 1917 , after the fall of the Tsar in the February Revolution he went to St Petersburg and took control of the Bolshevik paper, Pravda.

YOUNG STALIN

In the 1917 Revolution he did not play any particularly outstanding role (contrary to later mythmaking), politically mainly falling into line behind Lenin. In the Bolshevik Government he became Commissar for Nationalities.

In the Civil War he served as a commander of the Red Army in Tsaritsyn (renamed Stalingrad in 1925 and then Volgograd in 1961). Then in 1922 he was appointed General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party (CPSU). In May 1922 Lenin was paralysed by a stroke and was not subsequently able to play much of a political role, nevertheless in the last year of his life Lenin became increasingly hostile to Stalin, clashing with him over the right to self-determination for oppressed nationalities and his bureaucratic tendencies, calling in his 'testament' for Stalin's removal as General Secretary.

In 1923 Stalin assumed leadership of the CPSU in an alliance with Kamenev and Zinoviev directed mainly against Trotsky. Between 1924 and 1928 Stalin promulgated the doctrine of 'socialism in one country' and fought factional struggles within the CPSU against Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev (the Left Opposition) and then against Bukharin and the Right opposition, emerging effectively as the dictator of Russia.

In 1928 he launched the first Five Year Plan aiming at the rapid industrialisation of Russia and in 1929 he imposed, at great human cost, the forced collectivisation of agriculture in State farms. In 1934-5, following the assassination of his rival Sergei Kirov, he launched a series of purges which culminated in the Moscow Trials of 1936-37-38. These were public show trials in which Old Bolsheviks, such as Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and many others, were accused of treason, sabotage and being agents of Trotsky and the Nazis, and summarily executed.

At this time Stalin's Russia was a classic example of a totalitarian dictatorship in which all social life was controlled by the Party and no opposition, political or even cultural, was tolerated.

In August 1939, on the eve of the Second World War he formed an alliance with Hitler, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, which gave Hitler the green light to invade Poland while he occupied Eastern Poland.

In June 1941, Hitler violated this pact and invaded Russia. Stalin then led Russia in the Second World War. He formed alliances with Britain and the US and Russia played a key role in the defeat of Nazi Germany through epic battles such as the Siege of Leningrad (September 1941- January 1944) and the Battle of Stalingrad (July 1942-February 1943). In 1945 the victorious Red Army occupied most of Eastern Europe including Berlin. Stalin died, aged 74, on 5 March 1953.

What is Stalinism?

THE terms Stalinism and Stalinist are used, like many political terms such as communism and social democrat, in a number of different ways.

In the first instance Stalinism can refer to the ideas and political actions of Joseph Stalin himself and to those who consider themselves supporters or admirers of Stalin. But here we must remember that Stalin changed over time: the Stalin of 1912 or 1917 was not the same as the Stalin of 1937 and that, especially after he became ruler of Russia, there was a big difference between what he said and what he did, between his 'theory' and his actions.

In a similar usage Stalinism can refer to the whole regime in Russia when Stalin was effectively in command – approximately 1927- 53 - and to the characteristic features of this regime such as the prison system in Siberia (known as 'the Gulag') and the secret police (best known as the KGB).

But the terms Stalinism/Stalinist also have much wider usages. They can be used to refer to the regime in Russia that survived long after the denunciation of Stalin himself by Khrushchev in 1956 and lasted until the collapse of communism in 1989-91. They can be used to refer to the states that were created in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War 2, under the auspices of Moscow and in the image of the Soviet state – Poland, Hungary, East Germany etc – and to broadly similar regimes that developed in China under Mao, North Korea, North Vietnam and so on.

Finally, they can refer to the international Communist movement as a whole – the Comintern (Communist International) and Communist Parties such as the Italian, French, Irish, South African, Chilean, Indian and numerous others – which fell under Stalinist hegemony from the mid-1920s onwards. Taken together these different meanings and usages of Stalinism constitute a global tradition existing to a greater or lesser extent in almost all countries, deriving from the Russian Revolution but given a very specific inflection by Stalin and his numerous followers. Its main characteristic and unifying ideological principle was the belief that the USSR represented a kind of Socialist motherland and model for socialist development.

These different aspects of Stalinism, and we are critical of all of them, will each be examined in this pamphlet.

Stalinism and Counterrevolution

SOME people are drawn towards Stalinism on the principle that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. They think that since the right and the mainstream media are so vociferous in their condemnation of Stalin and 'Communism' as a whole this cannot be the whole story; there must be something good and radical about them. Our objection to Stalinism is that far from being radical or 'real' communism it has in fact, throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, been thoroughly counter revolutionary.

The horrors of the First World War produced a huge wave of revolt. Beginning in Ireland with the 1916 Easter Rising, it continued in 1917 in Russia with the February

revolution that overthrew the Tsar and then the October socialist revolution. After that revolutionary upheavals spread to Finland, Hungary, Germany (overthrowing the Kaiser and bringing the First World War to an end), Italy (the factory occupations of the 'Red Years' of 1919-20), Ireland (the War of Independence, the Limerick Soviet etc), Bulgaria, Egypt and other places. International capitalism was seriously threatened in a way it has never been before or since. The British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, wrote to the Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister:

> *'The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution... the whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the mass of the population from one end of Europe to the other'.[1]*

Tragically this revolutionary wave was everywhere defeated and revolution gave way to counterrevolution. In Finland more than 10,000 were executed in a vicious White Terror. In Italy the lost revolutionary opportunity of the Red Years was followed by the triumph of Mussolini and fascism. In Ireland the revolutionary developments of 1918-21 were thrown back in a Civil War that saw the victory of counterrevolutionary forces and the establishment of the deeply conservative and reactionary Free State. Most disastrously of all, the failure of the German Revolution in 1923 was accompanied by the birth of Nazism which led eventually to Hitler's conquest of power in 1933. In other countries the immediate results were less catastrophic but everywhere capitalism survived and was restabilized. The rise and victory of Stalinism in Russia was part of this international counterrevolution.

This claim runs counter to the dominant narrative in both the West and the East which sees Stalin's Russia as a continuation of the Russian Revolution and of Leninism.[2] But the facts are compelling.

One of the earliest acts of the Bolshevik government in late 1917 was the de-criminalisation of homosexuality and there were openly gay members of the government such as Georgy Chicherin who served as Commissar for Foreign Affairs from May 1918 until 1930. In 1933 homosexuality was again made illegal, which it remained until 1993.

The Russian Revolution proclaimed its commitment to complete legal and social equality for women and in 1920 the Soviet Union was the first country in the world to make abortion completely legal and free. Stalinist Russia recriminalized abortion in 1935[3] as well as introducing medals for motherhood (i.e. having numerous children).

The Russian Revolution stood for the right of nations to self-determination which included the right of national minorities in Russia to secede from the Soviet Union. Lenin was especially associated with and committed to this policy. [This is why Putin recently blamed Lenin for the creation of an independent Ukraine.][4] The Stalinist regime reversed this. Under Stalin there was a general policy of Russification and many of Russia's national minorities suffered severe oppression with the dissolution of a number of the USSR's National Republics and the forced deportation of their entire populations, e.g. the Volga-German Republic in 1941, the Kalmyks in 1943, and the Chechens and the Crimean Tatars in 1946. The Stalinist regime also cynically exploited and encouraged anti-Semitism.[5]

In the first years of the Revolution there was a brilliant explosion of artistic creativity which took many experimental forms producing avant-garde artists such as the poets, Mayakovsky and Yesenin, the painters and designers, Malevich, Rodchenko, Popova, and Stassova and film makers, Eisenstein and Vertov. Under Stalinism this diversity was crushed and art was reduced to state approved propaganda. Even a figure as

distinguished as the great composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, found himself condemned and threatened because Stalin didn't like his style.

The October Revolution and the Bolshevik leaders of that time were strongly internationalist. They believed, following Karl Marx, that the workers of the world should unite, they organised the Communist International (Comintern) to promote world revolution and they were convinced that the Russian Revolution couldn't survive indefinitely without spreading to other countries. In 1924, after Lenin's death Stalin put forward the view that socialism could be built in Russia on its own without international revolution and began to promote Great Russian nationalism. This had an immense impact on the international Communist movement which we will explain later.

In August 1917 at its 6th Party Congress the Bolshevik Party elected a Central Committee of 21 people. Of these, seven died in the Civil War or of natural causes before 1927: Dzerzhinsky, Sverdlov, Lenin, Sergeyev, Uritsky, Nogin, and Shahumyan. No less than ten were murdered by Stalin in his Show Trials and purges of the 1930s: Berzin, Bubnov, Bukharin, Kamenev, Krestinsky, Milyutin, Rykov, Smilga, Sokolnikov, and Zinoviev and Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico in 1940. Only three – Muranov, Kollontai and Stalin himself – survived. But this was only the tip of the iceberg of tens of thousands of Communists murdered in Stalin's purges. He killed far more Communists than the Tsar ever did. Above all Stalin wiped out almost all the 'Old Bolsheviks' who had joined the Party before the Revolution and thus remembered what Bolshevism had really stood for.

The bedrock of the Russian Revolution was workers' power as expressed in the famous slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' and in the transfer of state power to the Soviets or Workers' Councils in the October Insurrection. This was accompanied by workers' control in industry. The effectiveness of working class power declined during the Civil War and in the 1920s but under Stalin's dictatorship every vestige of it was eliminated both in the factories and in the state. Lenin had defended the rights of trade unions to organise even against his own Bolshevik Government. The Stalin regime took complete control of the unions and deprived them of any semblance of independence. This destruction of working class power was the essence of the counterrevolution. It was presided over by Stalin but was far from being his work alone. Rather it involved the rise of a whole new class of state, industrial and party bureaucrats who ran the whole society and were highly privileged for doing so. This bureaucratic class long outlived Stalin and, in large part, survived the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-91. Both Vladimir Putin and his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, came from it.

Understanding the counterrevolutionary nature of Stalinism at this time raises two important questions. How did it happen and what was the nature of the society it ruled over?

The victory of the Stalinist counterrevolution was not a product of the doctrines of Marx or Lenin or the personal qualities of Stalin but was produced by two major interrelated objective developments: the effective destruction of the Russian working class in the devastating Civil War of 1918-1921 and the isolation of the Revolution due to its failure to spread internationally.

The Civil War was imposed on the Revolution by Tsarist Generals in concert with international capitalism. It directly claimed the lives of huge numbers of the most politically conscious workers but also smashed Russian industry to the point where in 1921 gross industrial production stood at only 31 per cent of its (already very low) 1913 level. Factories closed, the railways broke down, famine, cholera and typhus raged. Workers returned to the countryside in search of food. The total of industrial workers in

Russia fell from about 3 million in 1917 to only 1.25 million in 1921. As Lenin observed at the time:

> *[The] industrial proletariat ... in our country, owing to the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin has become declassed, i.e. dislodged from its class groove and has ceased to exist as a proletariat.*[6]

By 1921 the class that made the Revolution had to all intents and purposes disappeared. The Russian working class of 1921 lacked the capacity either to run society or control its leaders. In this situation the state and party officials, the administrators and industrial managers, all held together by the Communist Party became less and less held to democratic account, and more and more an independent bureaucratic class elevated above the working class they claimed to represent.

If the Revolution had spread rapidly to other countries, as it very nearly did, the Civil War and its consequences could largely have been avoided. If the Revolution had spread later, say to Germany in 1923, it would have greatly relieved the pressure on the young Soviet state. But the failure of the international revolution, the triumph of vicious counterrevolution, had the opposite effect. It put the Soviet Union under immense pressure to rapidly develop economically so as to defend itself militarily against the ever-present threat of intervention. In conditions of desperate poverty and economic breakdown the capital required for rapid industrial growth was going to have to be extracted from the labour of the workers and peasants and that this accumulation required a social agent, a privileged social class that would drive the process while also benefitting from it. That agent was the Stalinist bureaucracy. Stalin, as Party General Secretary, played an important role in shaping its development, in selecting and promoting officials who would be loyal to him, but there was also a sense in which the bureaucracy selected him as its leader.

So what kind of society did this bureaucracy preside over? The standard answer, both in the mainstream media and political discourse as well as among many on the left, is that it was a socialist society, albeit an oppressive one, because the vast bulk of industry and production was owned and run by the state. But this identification of capitalism with private property and socialism with state ownership is mistaken. Both private ownership and state ownership existed in many different societies historically long before capitalism first developed (from about the sixteenth century) and before socialism was even conceived of. Also degrees of state ownership, sometimes large degrees, exist in all capitalist societies. What makes a society socialist is the use of state ownership to bring production under the control of working people and therefore to produce for human need not for profit. State ownership in itself is not socialist at all. Marx's collaborator Frederick Engels explained this clearly.

> *... the transformation — either into joint-stock companies and trusts, or into State-ownership — does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces... The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine — the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers — proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with. It is, rather, brought to a head.*

And

> *But of late, since Bismarck went in for State-ownership of industrial*

establishments, a kind of spurious Socialism has arisen, degenerating, now and again, into something of flunkeyism, that without more ado declares all State-ownership, even of the Bismarkian sort, to be socialistic. Certainly, if the taking over by the State of the tobacco industry is socialistic, then Napoleon and Metternich must be numbered among the founders of Socialism.

... Otherwise, the Royal Maritime Company, the Royal porcelain manufacture, and even the regimental tailor of the army would also be socialistic institutions, or even, as was seriously proposed by a sly dog in Frederick William III's reign, the taking over by the State of the brothels.[7]

And the great Irish socialist, James Connolly, summed it up brilliantly.

Socialism properly implies above all things the co-operative control by the workers of the machinery of production; without this co-operative control the public ownership by the State is not Socialism – it is only State capitalism...

Therefore, we repeat, state ownership and control is not necessarily Socialism – if it were, then the Army, the Navy, the Police, the Judges, the Gaolers, the Informers, and the Hangmen, all would all be Socialist functionaries, as they are State officials – but the ownership by the State of all the land and materials for labour, combined with the co-operative control by the workers of such land and materials, would be Socialism.[8]

Stalinist Russia was not socialist but state capitalist. It competed with Western capitalism on capitalist terms. Production was not based on serving the needs of the ordinary workers and peasants, it was geared to the competitive accumulation of capital on the basis of exploiting workers and peasants. So Stalinism was thoroughly counterrevolutionary in that it restored, in a different form, the capitalism that had been overthrown in 1917.

The state capitalist nature of Stalinist Russia also explains why when the Stalinist/ Communist regime collapsed in 1991, the ruling state and industrial bureaucrats were able to move so easily into taking over private industry and enriching themselves.

Stalinism and International Communism

STALINISM also played a disastrous counter revolutionary role internationally.

The Communist International or Comintern was founded in March 1919. By the time of its Second Congress, it had the support of mass working class parties in a number of countries and 67 affiliates globally. The Comintern was conceived of, by its founders, as a single world party of socialist revolution. Its task was to coordinate and carry through in each individual country the proletarian revolution begun in Russia in October 1917. But in winning the struggle for power inside the Russian Communist Party in the 1920s, the Stalinist bureaucracy also took control of the Comintern. They were able to do this by exploiting the prestige of the Russian Revolution. This rapidly had a devastating impact on the practice of the Communist parties globally.

In line with Stalin's new doctrine of 'socialism in one country', the CPs came to be treated by the Comintern leadership not as agents of working class revolution but as instruments of Soviet foreign policy. In particular, they were steered towards cultivating various reformist and bourgeois forces who, it was hoped, could be relied upon to hinder and oppose Western intervention in Russia.

One place where this immediately had terrible consequences was in China. There, the young but large Communist Party was told to form an alliance with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), in which they completely subordinated themselves to the KMT. This was because Stalin hoped the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek, would prove a useful international ally. But when the workers of China rose up en masse in 1925–27, Chiang Kai-shek waited for the opportunity to strike and then put the unprepared and unresisting Chinese Communists to the sword ('literally' as they say) in the Shanghai Massacre in April 1927.[9]

Even more catastrophic were the consequences of Stalinist policies in Germany during the rise of the Nazis. From 1924–28, the Comintern moved rightwards to opportunist alliances, but in 1928/29 it lurched dramatically 'leftwards' to an extreme and disastrous ultra-leftism. This turn, known as 'the Third Period' or 'Third Period Stalinism', was imposed by Moscow in tandem with Stalin's introduction of the Five Year Plan and forced collectivisation of agriculture. Stalin needed exaggerated left-wing rhetoric to cover his establishment of state capitalism and his personal dictatorship in Russia, and the German and international working class were made to pay the price. After the Wall St Crash of 1929 plunged the world and especially Germany into deep crisis, Hitler and his Nazi Party started to grow massively. In 1928, the Nazis polled 800,000 votes. In 1930, the Nazi vote shot up to 6,400,000. The thoroughly Stalinist German Communist Party (KPD) refused to recognise the danger. Instead, they claimed this huge advance constituted the 'beginning of the end' for 'Mr.Hitler' and that they, the KPD, were the real victors in the election, despite getting only 4,600,000 votes. They also comforted themselves with the disastrous illusion that, if the fascists came to power, they would soon shoot their bolt and that 'after Hitler' would come their turn. Moreover, the Stalinists accompanied this vain bragging with an ultra-sectarian refusal to form a united front with the Social Democrats against the Nazis on the grounds that the Social Democrats had become 'social fascists' and that fascism and social democracy were not opposites but 'twins'. This 'ultraleftism' assisted the Nazis in two ways. On the one hand, it lulled rank-and-file Communists into a false sense of security. If the social democrats and the fascists were twins, then there was no need to be particularly alarmed at the prospect of a Nazi government. On the other hand, it rendered impossible any united resistance to the fascists on the ground. The consequence was that, when the German bourgeoisie lifted Hitler into power in January 1933, the German working class – on paper the strongest, best organised working class in Europe –surrendered without a fight, and the first act of the Nazi government was to smash to smithereens all the organisations of the German working class, communist and social democratic alike, before going on to plunge the world into war and carry out the Holocaust.

Once Hitler was in power, it seems gradually to have dawned on Stalin that the Nazi regime, with its ambitions for lebensraum (living space) in the East, constituted a serious military threat to the Soviet state. This realisation brought about a 180 degree turn in Comintern policy from opposition to any united front to the indiscriminate unity of the Popular Front. The strategy of the Popular Front, pioneered in France in 1934, was adopted at the 7th Congress of the Comintern in 1935. It involved the attempt to construct grand alliances in every country, not just between working class organisations and the left but also with so-called 'democratic' bourgeois parties, such as the Radical Party in France or progressive Tories in Britain, while behind the scenes Stalin manoeuvred for an alliance at state level with Britain and France. As a strategy, Popular Frontism faced its decisive tests in Spain.

In Spain, following many years of acute class struggle, a Popular Front government

was elected in February 1936 but was met by an armed fascist rebellion led by General Francisco Franco. This led to three years of bitter Civil War in which the fascists, backed by Hitler and Mussolini (while Britain and France stayed neutral), were eventually victorious and more than 200,000 anti-fascists were slaughtered. Franco's initial coup was met by a mass revolutionary response from the working class, especially in Barcelona, but this uprising was restrained and then repressed by the Popular Front, including the Spanish CP, in the name of 'unity' against Franco. 'First win the war, then worry about the revolution' was the line, but, without revolutionary action from below, the working class was demobilised and demoralised, and the war could not be, and was not, won on a purely military basis.

BARCELONA 1937

This showed the fundamental flaw in the Popular Front strategy and how it differed from the united front. The purpose of the united front was to maximise the fighting strength of the working class, i.e. to increase the size and militancy of demonstrations, mass strikes and workers' occupations. The effect – and the precondition – of the Popular Front with its 'unity' with the capitalists and their parties was to hold back and limit the working class struggle. Nor could it be otherwise because the British and French capitalists would not dream of entering an alliance on any other terms.

When Stalin couldn't get a military alliance with British and French imperialism, he opted for a deal with Hitler (the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1938–June 1941), and when that broke down with Hitler's invasion of Russia in 1941 and he got his alliance with Britain (and the US), Stalin unceremoniously wound up the Comintern in 1943 as a 'gesture of good will' to the allies.

During the Second World War many Communist Parties, especially in France and Italy, grew massively due to association with the Russian war against the Nazis and to their mass participation in the anti-Nazi resistance movements. But in the period 1945-46 when there was mass upheaval in many parts of Europe (France, Italy, Greece etc) Stalinism again played a counter-revolutionary role with the Western CPs, on orders from Moscow, using their influence not to stir up revolution but to pacify the situation.

In 1956 Stalinism experienced a major crisis with Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at a secret session of the CPSU's 20th Congress and with the Hungarian Revolution which Khruschev crushed with Russian tanks. At this point many notable communists broke away and although the majority of the CPs remained loyal to the Russian line, many of the Western CPs started to distance themselves from Moscow control.

By the time it came to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, many Western CPs, including the British, actually opposed the invasion and, for the first time, defied Moscow. But this move did not lead to the radicalisation of the CPs or their return to revolutionary socialism. Rather it led to what became known as Eurocommunism, spearheaded by the Italian Communist Party, which culminated in Italy in the mid-1970s in the 'historic compromise', whereby the CP made an alliance with the Christian Democrats. It also brought with it a shift away from grassroots industrial organisation in the direction of 'cultural politics' allegedly inspired by Gramsci.[10] However, social democratic reformism with a 'communist' tinge proved no more successful than

social democratic reformism without a 'communist' tinge. In Italy, the once mighty CP went into gradual but chronic decline, and Eurocommunism proved a failure everywhere it was put to the test, culminating in the utter debacle and surrender by Eurocommunism's descendants in Syriza.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1968

Capitalism today has entered a massive crisis – ecological, economic and geo-political – but Stalinism offers no positive or revolutionary alternative, only a history of betrayals and the repetition of a tired reformism which failed again and again to deliver socialist change.

Stalinism in Eastern Europe

AT the close of the Second World War the Soviet Red Army marched across Eastern Europe and captured Berlin. The result was the establishment from the Baltic to the Black Sea of a chain of 'communist' states known as Peoples' Republics: Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. The exception to this was Yugoslavia where the anti-Nazi resistance lead by Marshall Tito and Yugoslavia Communists took power under their own steam. These states became in important respects carbon copies of the Soviet State. They were largely state-owned and planned economies, one party states with uncontested elections, run by political/secret police with strict censorship and the repression of dissent and they were all members of the Warsaw Pact. But there was an important difference between them and the Soviet Union in that the Soviet Union dominated all the others both politically and economically. In the same way that the Indian or Irish economies were run to serve the interests of Britain in the British Empire so the Eastern European economies were run to benefit Russia. In short, they were victims of imperialist oppression.

The consequence of this was that there were repeated revolts in these countries directed at both the national regimes and Soviet domination. These included the German Workers' revolt of 1953, the Polish opposition and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the Solidarnosc revolt in Poland in 1980. These culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the general disintegration of the Eastern Bloc at the end of 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Like Stalinist Russia, these Eastern European countries were widely considered to be examples of actually existing socialism. However, this rode a coach and horses through the most basic ideas of Marx and Marxism. Marx believed and stated repeatedly that the emancipation of the working class had to be the act of the working class itself. But the People's Republics were not produced by working class action; rather they were imposed from above by the Red Army. This opened the door to all sorts of ideas of what Hal Draper called 'socialism from above' and severed the historic link between socialism and the working class. Even worse it gave socialism and communism a completely bad name among working people across Eastern Europe with the result that when these states fell, they generally embraced neo-liberal capitalism and have often moved towards racism, antisemitism and the far right; Hungary and Victor Orban being the most obvious example.

Stalinism and the Global South

THE story of Stalinism in the Global South has been rather different and at first sight much more successful than in the North. One of the great historical movements of the 20th century was the global struggle against colonialism which resulted in the achievement of national independence by the majority of former colonies in Asia and Africa. In many cases the Stalinized Communist Parties identified themselves with these struggles (except where they conflicted with the interests of the Soviet Union) and in some cases led them; China and Vietnam were examples of this and the outcome was the establishment of 'Communist' governments and states.

The basis on which the Communist Parties operated in these struggles was what is known as 'stages theory'. According to stages theory, which was often wrongly attributed to Marx, history in each country moved through set stages (feudalism, capitalism and socialism) and it was not possible to wage the struggle for socialism without first passing through a substantial period of capitalism (often described as bourgeois democracy). Moreover it was necessary for socialists to make an alliance with the nationalist bourgeoisie. In the course of pursuing this strategy Stalinists, in what was then called the Third World, effectively merged with anti-colonial nationalism.

This had a variety of outcomes. In many cases it led to terrible defeats with the repetition of what happened in China in 1927, namely the bourgeois nationalists turning on their communist and socialist 'allies' and crushing them. This is what happened in Indonesia in 1965 (where 500,000 communists were murdered), in Egypt under Nasser, in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and elsewhere in the Middle East. In other cases it led to Communist victory and the formation of 'Communist' states and these victories in China, Cuba and Vietnam still work as important points of attraction to Stalinist 'communism'.

The most important example of this was China. After the terrible defeat of 1927 and several subsequent crushed uprisings, Mao Zedong and the remnants of Chinese Communism fled to the countryside, to Jiangxi and Hunan, where they commenced a long guerrilla struggle, which included the epic Long March of the Red Army through the immense Chinese interior. This culminated, after a period of renewed limited alliance with the Kuomintang against Japanese invasion, in the victory of Mao and the Red Army in the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

In social terms, the Red Army was based on the Chinese peasantry, but it was led and controlled by the déclassé and displaced urban intellectuals of the [Stalinist] Chinese Communist Party. The role of the Chinese working class in this struggle was close to zero and certainly not in any way dominant. When the Red Army marched in victory into Beijing in 1949, the working class remained passive, and power was taken not by the Chinese peasantry (whose social position, as Marx and Lenin had argued long previously, precluded them emancipating themselves or running cities) but by the militarised CP intellectuals. What they established was not workers' power or socialism but a Chinese nationalist state capitalism, disguised under extravagant 'Marxist' rhetoric. Like Stalinist Russia it was a one-party dictatorship, with a massive cult of personality round Mao and heavy levels of repression as seen in the brutal suppression of the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1979.

Over the last thirty years China has seen extraordinary levels of economic growth and is close to overtaking the US as the biggest economy in the world but this has been capitalist growth. China has developed by participating in the world capitalist market and becoming the world's largest capitalist manufacturer – on the basis of massive exploitation of Chinese workers. It now has, depending on estimates, between 700 and 1100 billionaires (compared to approximately 700 in the US) and 4 million (!) millionaires. It also remains racist and imperialist – for example towards Tibet and towards the Muslim Uighurs in Xi Jiang - and a one party dictatorship.

MAO ZEDONG

In short, the Chinese Revolution was undoubtedly an historic victory against feudalism and imperialism making China a strong independent country but it did not lead to the establishment of any kind of workers' democracy or socialism.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was also the result of a rural guerrilla war but, in this case, led not by Communists or the Communist Party but by anti-imperialist revolutionaries and intellectuals such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos – men of great courage and daring it should be said. As in China, such a revolution could not, by its nature, establish either workers' power or peasant power. However, Castro's guerrilla army lacked an administrative cadre with which to govern Havana and Cuba. For this, he turned to the old Stalinist Cuban Communist Party and, in the process, proclaimed his conversion from nationalist humanism to Marxist-Leninism and declared (after the event) that Cuba had experienced a socialist revolution. At the same time, Cuba joined the Soviet bloc and placed itself under Russian protection. Again, the result was not socialism but state capitalism. The Cuban state was never as horrifically repressive as Stalin's Russia or Maoist China but it remains essentially a dictatorship. Of course, none of this affects the anti-imperialist duty of all socialists to defend Cuba against the US blockade or any attempts by the US to intervene in or dominate the country, but it does mean defending the right of Cubans themselves to struggle for democracy and equality.

A different case again is South Africa. Here, as elsewhere, the Stalinist Communist Party adopted the stages theory of a struggle against Apartheid first and a struggle for socialism later. In accordance with this, the CP made an alliance with black nationalist forces in the African National Congress. Within this alliance, they accepted an influential but ultimately subordinate role (to Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and so on) and argued against working-class militancy or socialist demands. The result was that, when the Apartheid regime finally capitulated in the early 1990s, South African capitalism survived unscathed. A black bourgeoisie, epitomised by current president, the billionaire Cyril Ramaphosa, emerged, including many leading Communists; corporate white economic power and white landownership continued, as did township poverty, and South Africa remained one of the most unequal countries in the world.

Thus, in all these instances, as in others such as India, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Mozambique, Tanzania and, of course, Ireland, a real victory was won – national independence – but it was bourgeois national independence, not socialism.

Finally, we should note that while Stalinism in the West has benefitted from its association with the likes of heroic figures such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara or, in the past Ho Chi Minh, it has also tended to extend its more or less uncritical support for the enemies of US imperialism to figures such as Assad of Syria and Gadaffi of Libya, who are plainly oppressors of their own people, even when the masses in these

countries rise up against them. Stalinist support for Assad, whose suppression of the Syrian Revolution has involved the slaughter of close to half a million Syrians, is an extreme example of this. It is worth saying that this approach has a certain 'radical' appeal in that it seems to defy American power and the bourgeois media, but in global terms, it is profoundly counter-revolutionary and denies not only revolutionary agency but even basic democratic rights to large swathes of the world's population. To people in dictatorships that are not in the US imperialist camp e.g. Sudan, Iran or North Korea it says to them you have no right to revolt in case America pretends to support you, so just suffer in silence.

A Note on Stages Theory

WHAT is referred to in this pamphlet as 'stages' theory is by no means confined to Stalinism. Indeed in any society faced with a deep-seated injustice or structural oppression it can seem like common sense reformism. In the US in the sixties it was said, 'First we win civil rights and fight racism, then we will fight for socialism later'. In Palestine, 'First we defeat Zionism and free Palestine, then we will worry about defeating capitalism later'. In Ireland in the seventies, 'First we drive the Brits out of the Six Counties and then we fight for a workers' republic'. And the same logic can be applied to almost any issue. 'First we must get women's equality, first let's win LGBTQ rights, first we must tackle climate change and then ...'

This is a very understandable reaction and socialists are emphatically not saying the opposite. We are **never** saying the struggle against imperialism, racism, sexism, climate change etc should be postponed until after we have defeated capitalism. On the contrary we believe all oppression and exploitation should be resisted by every means necessary in the here and now, but that alongside all these concrete struggles we also need to make the case for socialism and the mobilization of the working class **in the here and now**. The problem with the two stages logic is that in practice it always postpones the struggle against capitalism indefinitely.

What Stalinism did was give this mechanical stages approach Marxist credentials. It was true that Marx had written of different modes of production (Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal and Capitalist) as progressive stages in the development of humanity but that was when he was making the broadest of historical generalisations and at that level this was justified. But when he was dealing with concrete situations such as the 1848 revolution in Germany or the role of peasant communes in Russia he emphasised the possibility of transforming the democratic revolution into a working class one and leaping over fixed stages.

In Russia in the early 20th century this question was much debated among revolutionaries. It was the Menshevik faction that argued for the stages theory and insisted on the need for a bourgeois revolution and this led them to oppose the October socialist revolution in 1917. In contrast Lenin argued that even a democratic revolution should be led by the working class and Trotsky argued, rightly as it turned out, that a democratic revolution against the Tsar could and should grow over into workers socialist revolution which would then be completed on the international stage. This was the meaning of his theory of Permanent Revolution.

Stalinism from the mid-1920s onwards reverted to the Menshevik position (without acknowledging it, of course) and used it to justify support for bourgeois nationalism and for never actually confronting capitalism.

Stalinism in Ireland

Because of the post-Civil War counter-revolution – 'the carnival of reaction' following partition – and the continuing influence of the republican tradition,[11] the influence of Stalinism in Ireland has been very weak. Consequently, Irish Stalinism cannot be held responsible for catastrophes on the scale of the defeat in China in 1927 and the failure to stop Hitler. Nevertheless, its role has been damaging.

The key to this has been Irish Stalinism's acceptance and promulgation of the stages theory of revolution. As we have seen, this doctrine – Menshevik in origin – was adopted by the Stalinised Comintern in relation to China in 1925–27 and then generalised to the rest of the developing world. In Ireland, it meant arguing that Ireland had first to complete its struggle for national political and economic independence, which would be waged in alliance with the 'progressive national bourgeoisie', before beginning the struggle for a workers' republic. This was counterposed to Connolly's denunciation in Labour in Irish History of the repeated treachery of the 'national' bourgeoisie and his advocacy of the working class as the only 'incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland'.[12]

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One important turning point where this had an effect was in the Republican Congress in 1934. This very promising development emerged as a breakaway to the left of the IRA as a result of the failure of the Army Council to permit agitation against the Blueshirts and also conducted impressive work against sectarianism in Belfast. In April 1934, they produced a manifesto which stated, 'We believe a Republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots capitalism on its way'.[13] But, in fact, many in the Republican Congress leadership, including its main mover, Peadar O'Donnell, were opposed to raising the demand for a Workers' Republic, as proposed by Connolly's children, Roddy Connolly and Nora Connolly O'Brien. At a Congress in September 1934, the O'Donnell position, which advocated 'the Republic' but not 'the Workers' Republic', was narrowly passed by 99 votes to 84, crucially with the support of the Irish Communist Party.[14] As a result, a serious opportunity to found a revolutionary party with a base in the working class was missed for a whole generation.

Its adoption of the stages theory meant that the Irish Communist Party played a conservative role on the Irish left for decades to come. Mike Milotte comments that 'The assertion that national independence should be fought for prior to, and not in unison with, the struggle for socialism ultimately led the Irish communist movement back to supporting Fianna Fáil, and even to declaring that only Fianna Fáil could unite Ireland and free it from Britain's grasp.'[15]

Even today, we still hear echoes of this idea in the possibility, emphatically not ruled out by Mary Lou McDonald, that Sinn Fein may go into coalition with Fianna Fáil in the hope of uniting Ireland from above.

Another channel by which the Stalinist stages theory permeated the Irish left was C. Desmond Greaves' influential biography of James Connolly. Greaves was a former member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Connolly Association. In The Life and Times of James Connolly(1961),[16] which was widely regarded as authoritative, he maintained that the 'mature' Connolly had come round to accepting a two-stages view of the Irish Revolution and that this was what led him to join with Pearse and the nationalists in the 1916 Rising.[17] Greaves, in turn, along with Roy Johnston, was influential in winning the IRA/Sinn Féin over to a Stalinist version of Marxism in the 1960s, and this also fed into the disaster of the Workers' Party.

After the split between the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA in December 1969, Official Sinn Féin evolved into Sinn Féin–the Workers' Party in 1977 and then the Workers' Party in 1982. The Workers' Party, which was thoroughly Stalinist in its ideology, sought and received a certain amount of support from the Soviet Union and, notoriously, from North Korea. However, it also succeeded in building a considerable base in the working class, and, in 1989, it won seven seats in Dáil Eireann with 5% of the vote. However, this remarkable success (by the standard of Irish history) was immediately undermined by the organisation's Stalinism. Its commitment to the stages theory led the Workers' Party to the view that it should advocate the industrialisation of Ireland to complete the first stage of the Irish Revolution, i.e. it should support capitalist industrialisation. Consequently, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989–91 and the majority of the Workers' Party TDs became convinced the 'Communist project' had failed, they moved to the right, not the left. In 1992, they split to form Democratic Left and from there moved on to join the Labour Party. Inside Labour, they used their considerable organisational skills to capture the leadership of the party. The upshot was that when the Labour Party formed a coalition government with Fine Gael in 2011 and proceeded to dramatically betray its working class voters in a way that has still not been forgiven, it did so largely under the leadership of former Stalinists in the shape of Eamon Gilmore, Pat Rabbitte and Rory 'Ho Chi' Quinn.[18] One thing these Labour traitors retained from their Stalinist past was their pathological hatred of 'the Trots'.

One of the ways in which Stalinism manifests itself in contemporary Ireland is in a kind of amalgam with radical or dissident republicanism. The two traditions exercise a similar attraction. On the one hand there is of the appeal of being heirs, at least in words, to the 'revolutionary' tradition of the armed struggle: Wolfe Tone, the Fenians, 1916, Kevin Barry, Bobby Sands and so on. On the other hand the 'revolutionary' sounding, in your face label of 'communist' as opposed to mere 'socialist' [19] and the association with likes of guerrilla leaders such as Guevara, Castro and Ho Ci Minh. However, these traditions have something more in common than shock value. What they share is a preference for the idea of a minority (heroic, enlightened or just powerful) acting on behalf of the masses and liberating them from above. Explicitly or, more often, implicitly they reject Marx's concept that 'the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself'.[20] But whereas such a heroic minority had a chance of success in an underdeveloped (predominantly peasant) failed state such as China in 1949 or Cuba in 1958/9, it cannot succeed in urban industrialised society such as Ireland, or for that matter Chile or China today. The state apparatus and the power of the corporations are far too strong to be overthrown, except through mobilising the mass of the working class on the streets and in their workplaces. And a new socialist society cannot be built on any other foundation than real workers' democracy. What we mean by that will be explained in the next section.

The Revolutionary Alternative

THE author of this pamphlet, and the Socialist Workers Network (SWN) of which I am a member, have a very different vision of socialism from the top-down conception of authoritarian Stalinism. It is a democratic socialism from below in which working class people themselves control their workplaces and industries and run society as a whole. This is not a slightly improved version of the so-called liberal democracy current in Ireland, Europe or the US. This 'bourgeois democracy' is a fraud in that while working people can vote for deputies in parliaments which are essentially talking shops, real power lies in the boardrooms of the banks and corporations, and in the control of the armed forces and the state. What is needed for genuine socialism, not as an ideal utopia but as a bare minimum, is workers' power and workers' democracy based on popular assemblies or workers' councils in which delegates are elected from workplaces and communities and are subject to democratic recall.

In Ireland today there is both the need and the opportunity to end partition which, as James Connolly predicted led to 'a carnival of reaction' and two rotten states both sides of the border. In this country, as everywhere else in the world such as Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan, we are strongly anti-imperialist and reject Britain's right to occupy or rule Northern Ireland. But we do not see the anti-imperialist struggle in terms of fixed stages: either first we unite Ireland and then take up the struggle against capitalism or first we achieve socialism and then we can unite the country. Rather we pursue the struggle for Irish unity and the struggle for socialism together and we want to see the working class taking the lead in both struggles simultaneously. We work concretely to unify struggles-for workers' rights, for women's rights, against racism, for LGBTQ rights, for climate justice and so on - across the whole island of Ireland so as to forge a new concept of Irish unity.

As part of People Before Profit we campaign for a strong Left Government in Ireland to end the Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael duopoly but that in itself will not be enough. Such a government will neither be able to survive nor implement a radical programme without mass working class mobilization from below, and to break capitalist power that mobilization will have to culminate in revolution.

The precise forms of this revolution will differ in different countries but in today's world where the working class is becoming the majority both globally and in virtually every sizeable country, it will be the working class that will be the drivers of the revolution and the agent of its own emancipation. A workers' revolution can, and probably will, make a breakthrough first in one country, whether it is Ireland or South Africa, China or Chile, but to sustain itself and complete the transition to full socialism it will need to spread internationally or be crushed or subverted by the power of international capitalism. As Karl Marx always understood, revolution and socialism must be international and internationalist or it will fail.

Revolution today also faces a challenge that Marx did not and could not know about, the challenge of profound environmental crisis and catastrophic climate change. Marx was deeply interested in questions of ecology and the danger that capitalism posed to the environment but the specific threat of climate change was not scientifically established in his day. Today it is and socialists and Marxists must rise to this challenge; this is why we say we are ecosocialists. The imminence of catastrophic climate change makes revolution more urgent than ever, but it also means we have to reject any model of socialism based, as all the Stalinist regimes have been, on relentless industrial growth and production for production's sake.

Global capitalism is visibly decaying. It is beset by a multitude of intersecting crises in its economy (inflation and recession), its health (the covid pandemic), its international relations (the Ukraine War and conflict with China) and its relations with nature, which threaten the death and displacement of hundreds of millions of people along with the looming spectre of fascist barbarism. Only democratic ecosocialism, a socialism from below fashioned for the challenges 21st century can resolve this crisis for Ireland and for humanity; the Stalinism of the past cannot.

[1] Cited in Chris Harman, A People's History of the World, London 1999, p.434.

[2] For a detailed criticism of the view that Leninism caused Stalinism see John Molyneux, 'Does Leninism lead to Stalinism?' Irish Marxist Review 17, March 2017. https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/molyneux/2017/xx/lentostal.htm

[3] See the discussion of this 'thrice shameful law' in Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, London, pp. 149–151.

[4] "I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bol-shevik, Communist Russia."
Putin tries to minimize Ukraine as a recent creation, an obscure entity that came about after what he de-scribed as a struggle between Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin over the contours of a national state. He harshly criticized Lenin for pushing for a confederation of supposedly independent states, which then were able to be-come independent nations after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. https://www.washing-tonpost.com/politics/2022/02/23/fact-checking-putins-speech-ukraine/

[5] For a very useful discussion of how this worked see Leon Trotsky 'Thermidor and Anti-Semitism' https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/02/therm.htm

[6] Lenin 'The NEP and the tasks of the political education departments' (1921), Collected Works, Vol 33, p.65. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/17.htm

[7] Frederick Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, London 1993, p103-4 and p.123. 8 James Connolly, 'State monopoly versus socialism', The Workers' Republic, 1899. https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1901/evangel/stmonsoc.htm

[9] For a graphic account of this tragedy see Harold R. Isaacs, The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution, Chicago 2010.

[10] This was a gross distortion of Gramsci who was in fact a thoroughgoing revolutionary. See Chris Harman, 'Gramsci versus Eurocommunism',London 1977. https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1977/05/gramsci1.html

[11] For an analysis of the Irish counter-revolution, see Kieran Allen, 1916:Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition, London, 2016, especially Ch.4.

[12] James Connolly, Labour in Irish History, London, 1987, p.24.

[13] Cited in Mike Milotte, Communism in Modern Ireland, Dublin, 1985, p.150.

[14] For an account of this episode, see Milotte, as above, pp.150–157.

[15] Ibid. p.157.

[16] C. Desmond Greaves, The Life and Times of James Connolly, London, 1976.

[17] See Kieran Allen's critique of Greaves in The Politics of James Connolly, London, 1990, pp.xii–xvi.

[18] For a detailed history of the Workers' Party, see Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers Party, Dublin, 2009.

[19] As in 'I'm a literal communist!'

[20] Karl Marx, The Rules of the International Working Men's Association (1864). https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1867/rules.htm

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"Some people are drawn towards Stalinism on the principle that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. They think that since the right and the mainstream media are so vociferous in their condemnation of Stalin and 'Communism' as a whole this cannot be the whole story; there must be something good and radical about them. Our objection to Stalinism is that far from being radical or 'real' communism it has in fact, throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, been thoroughly counter revolutionary."

This pamphlet presents the case that socialists and all those looking for an alternative to a decaying, destructive capitalism should not return to the Stalinism of the past in any of its forms but need a genuine revolutionary and democratic ecosocialism for the 21st century.

John Molyneux is a socialist activist and writer in Dublin, and a member of the Socialist Workers Network and People Before Profit. He is editor of the Irish Marxist Review and of a number of books, including Lenin for Today (2017), The Dialectics of Art (2019) and Selected Writings on Socialism and Revolution (2022).

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